

## ESL Controversy: Native Speaker vs. Non-Native Speaker

**Native speakers and non-native speakers can both succeed as ESL teachers.**

It's true, but there has always been some controversy in the ESL community over the difference between having one or the other teach language courses. Obviously the situation varies from place to place but there are definitely pros and cons for both sides of this debate. Let's take a look at just a few key points.

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### **Pronunciation**

It has been argued that **only native speakers should teach English** because they have the best pronunciation. On the one hand, this has some validity. In Japan, Japanese English teachers often have *very little experience speaking English* so their pronunciation can sometimes be quite poor. Assistant Language Teachers from English speaking countries have easily found work in Japan because the Boards of Education are trying to improve student pronunciation and native speakers have encouraged more **pronunciation practice** in Japanese public schools. However, an Assistant Language Teacher from Jamaica could be replaced after a year with an instructor from Scotland. It seems like this may not be ideal because obviously **people from these two English speaking countries sound entirely different so the model pronunciations they give will not be the same**. When teaching a language, **consistency is important** so there are some problems with this approach.

On the other hand, in countries such as the Netherlands, English teachers often have very good English pronunciation and therefore students do not really need a native speaker to model sentences for them. **Good English pronunciation does not mean using a British or American accent**; if a teacher is Italian, an Italian accent is perfectly acceptable as long as the words are being pronounced correctly. Accents are not an indication of poor teaching but of where a person is from. At any

rate, [audio](#) and [video clips](#) demonstrating proper English pronunciation are readily available and should be used by every ESL teacher to give students a chance to hear other voices. This does not mean that recordings can replace native English speakers or teachers with good pronunciation; it is simply another tool that teachers can use in their classrooms.

See our previous articles "[How to Teach Using Songs](#)", "[Classroom Songs: 16 Creative Ways](#)" and "[English Video Lessons: Winning Strategies for the ESL Class](#)" for more information on using audio and video in your English classroom.

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### Communication

In most school systems, the *immersion method* is not used to teach English but **the goal of ESL teachers should be to speak English in the classroom whenever possible**. While this is a good rule for teaching a language, this approach can be frustrating for students especially those who are [older](#) and beginners. It is often helpful for students to be able to ask questions in their native language or to draw parallels between their language (L1) and English. An English native speaker may not be able to clearly communicate more complex ideas and structures to students especially if his understanding of the local language is limited. In contrast a teacher who is fluent in the local language will have an easier time completing these tasks and will often be able to relate to and [manage students](#) more effectively too.

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### Experience

Most non-native speakers are trained teachers either in their country or the country they teach in which means that they often will have **much more teaching experience** than native speakers. **It seems foolish to assume that just because someone speaks English they can teach it effectively**. Without training in [classroom management](#) and lessons in [English grammar](#), native speakers cannot be effective ESL instructors. They may be able to speak the language but explaining it is an entirely different matter. If a native speaker is a qualified educator,

then they will have an advantage but when teaching abroad, as mentioned above, **it is also beneficial to be able to communicate with students in their native language**. When native English speakers are paired with local teachers, students have the best of both worlds.

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**It seems that both native English speakers and non-native English speakers can take steps to improve as teachers.**

Native English speakers who want to teach English as a Second Language need to study on their own or enroll in a course to help them improve in certain areas. They should keep reference material on hand so that they can find the answers to difficult questions when they arise and study the basics of the native language. Non-native speakers may have to get more practice speaking English but this has become much easier with the invention of programs like **Skype**. Both groups have valuable skill sets that benefit students in different ways.

APA Reference:

Arntsen, T. (n. d.) ESL controversy: native speaker vs. non-native speaker.

*Busy Teacher*. Retrieved from <http://busyteacher.org/4570-esl-controversy-native-speaker-vs-non-native.html>